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# The World in Chaos: A Paragon for Comedic Plays

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### The World in Chaos: A Paragon for Comedic Plays

When Samuel Beckett wrote his tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot* in France, the French nation was in turmoil due to the destructiveness of World War II. One generation later, an American named Tom Stoppard also wrote a play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, during a time of crisis; the United States was in utter confusion because of the Vietnam War. Both of these plays, as a result of the tumultuous times in which they were created, demonstrated how confusion in one's surroundings can cause a loss of certainty and identity.

Before Germany invaded Poland and World War II officially began, France thought of itself as the pinnacle of civilization. It was the center of all sophistication and culture, and it felt itself to be on a completely different level than its European counterparts. However, France inevitably became involved in the world war, and the eventual invasion of France by Germany had disastrous consequences. The discouraged French citizens stopped believing in themselves, and took on a sense of shame and disgrace.

Living in France this time, Beckett saw these events occurring around him and felt that the domination of Germany in this country took away his hope for the future. Beckett took these feelings and planted them in his play, creating a story with a bleak outlook on reality. The two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are men that wait endlessly for an unknown entity, Godot, to show up and direct them in what to do next in their lives. While waiting for Godot, the characters have several conversations where

their lack of confidence about the future is evident. In one scene the two men attempt to recall where they were to meet Godot and whether they were even waiting in the right place. Vladimir asks, “What did we do yesterday?” and Estragon replies, “What did we do yesterday?” (122) The two men have no recollection of the past, and later Vladimir angrily states, “...Nothing is certain when you’re about,” (122) Beckett showed, through the dialogues of his characters, that since the men did not know why they were called by Godot or even where the unseen man was, they had no idea what was definite and what was not. Lacking understanding of one’s environment causes uncertainty in one’s beliefs, opinions, and even commonplace facts.

During the time France was ruled by the Germans, people living in that country not only experienced shame, but also lost their belief in their French identity. Beckett implemented this notion into his play by making the two main characters seem interchangeable, showing their lack of individuality. At the beginning of the play, Vladimir questions, “It hurts?” and Estragon scoffs, “Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!” (188). A few seconds later, the discourse is repeated, except Estragon asks the question and Vladimir angrily spits out the reply. Again, this is an example of Beckett illustrating his world views through his writing, showing the reader that not fully understanding what is going in one’s immediate world can create a lack of personality and distinctiveness.

More than ten years after *Waiting for Godot* was written, Stoppard also wrote a play that reflected the views of his world at that time. In his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Stoppard portrayed the same facts his predecessor Beckett did. Not understanding where one stands can create a loss of two critical facets of life:

certainty and identity. During the Vietnam War, some citizens protested the continuance of a “pointless war” while others seemed convinced about the importance of America in Asia. The country was unsure how to deal with this issue, and many were not certain even of their own beliefs. Stoppard took these feelings floating around his country and implemented them into his play.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two men thrust into the world of Hamlet without having any idea of what is going on around them. They are monopolized by the characters of that famous play and never make any active decisions to alter their fates. At one point, Rosencrantz, completely irritated by the entrances and exits of other characters, exclaims, “Never a moment’s peace! In and out, on and off, they’re coming at us from all sides,” (738)

Thoroughly confused about the new world they find themselves in, the men are never sure which steps to take and how to approach any given issue. For example, after Claudius and Gertrude ask Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out what is wrong with Hamlet, the men spend a long period of time wondering how to approach this issue. They practice asking each other questions in preparation for talking to Hamlet, until Guildenstern tires of the confusing game and exclaims, “Consistency is all I ask!” (711). Through his writing, Stoppard showed how Americans longed for a sense of normalcy to return instead of the negative controversies caused by the Vietnam War.

In his writing, Stoppard portrayed how although a few individuals felt strongly one way or the other about fighting in Vietnam, the majority were not sure how they felt and what they wanted. They had no identities, an intriguing problem that Stoppard explored through his main characters. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are mixed up

countless times throughout the play, not only by other characters, but even between themselves. Meeting the two men, the prince Hamlet turns to Rosencrantz and says, “My excellent good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern?” Realizing his error in addressing the man in front of him, he then corrects himself by saying, “Ah, Rosencrantz!” (719). Because Rosencrantz and Guildenstern did not understand what was taking place around them, they did not know who they were and what role they were to play; therefore, neither did anyone else. Stoppard took the notion of two men with no control over their destinies and who were often mistaken for one another from Shakespeare and created a play that accurately symbolized the pervading feelings of his countrymen at the time. Not understanding where one stands, or even fully grasping the concept of one’s surroundings, can cause complete confusion and even the loss of one’s identity and individuality, making one seem just like everyone else.

The two playwrights Beckett and Stoppard had very similar writing styles, because they both reflected the ethos of their countries during the time they were creating their works of art. Both France and America were nations adrift during times of crisis; neither had any sense of values, because citizens in each had stopped believing in themselves and their countries. Turbulence creates inevitable inner and outer confusion that, as mirrored in these two plays, can lead to the absence of certainty and identity.

#### Works Cited

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